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Cover illustration: Ambassador Getachew

INTRODUCTION

Haile Selassie was the first leader, and the Ethiopians were the first people, to stand up against the military imperialism of Mussolini and Hitler. At the League of Nations, Haile Selassie spoke the conscience of mankind.

He was an extraordinary man. Face to face, one was impressed by his dignity and bearing, despite his short stature. One time I stood near him as he received a group of scientists from many countries, and I marveled at his ability to switch from Amharic to English, to Arabic, to Swahili, to French, and no doubt to other languages. In a private audience he could be charming, attentive to one's words, and remote, all at the same time.

But this remarkable man, who ruled for nearly half a century, and who did much to modernize Ethiopia while keeping it free and independent, in the end brought tragedy to his empire. Whether he was aware of the extent of the drought (the issue that finally brought about the crisis), or whether those officials who knew were too intimidated to tell him, is debatable. However, Haile Selassie's own lack of perception concerning another urgent question, the emergent rebellious youth of Ethiopia, was the underlying cause of his downfall. In one sense, the Emperor's own ignominious end made him the first victim of his misjudgment.

The author of this account of part of the continuing tragedy played an important, and in some ways an unusual, role in the recent history of his country.

Ambassador Getachew was born on December 20, 1933,

in Addis Ababa. His parents were both Amharas from the region of Addis Ababa, a critical factor in the opportunity to receive education. His father attended the Menelik primary school, the only European-type school in the Highlands. He worked in the post office before the Italian invasion. After liberation, the father was a civil servant in the Ministry of Justice, and from there was appointed to be a Judge of the High Court. He was renowned for his knowledge of traditional Ethiopian history and mores.

The Ambassador's mother came from a "priestly" family. Although the passage is not in this excerpt, elsewhere Ambassador Getachew criticizes Haile Selassie for dominating the Coptic Church and, through his appointees, turning it even more into a bulwark of conservatism. The church might have been used to motivate the common people. Its vast land holdings went unchanged but not unchallenged in the Emperor's time. The education of the clergy was along narrow religious lines, and otherwise uneducated priests therefore had little rapport with the better educated youth.

Ambassador Getachew belongs to the generation that marked a transition in Ethiopian education. He attended secondary school in Addis Ababa, and then went to the University of Bombay, where he took his B.A. Honours degree in Political History and Science in 1952.

After holding junior positions in various Ethiopian ministries, he was appointed Ambassador to Kenya in 1964, with concurrent accreditation to Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. He served in that post for five years. They were years in which Ethiopia had important relations with the East African countries. Haile Selassie came to know him well and to trust his judgment.

From 1969 to 1971, Ambassador Getachew was Minister of Information in Haile Selassie's cabinet, a responsibility that always means treading a narrow line in an authoritarian regime that needs to modernize. Say too much and you lose your position, your influence for change, and sometimes your life. Say too little, and you

acquiesce in what you do not support and become, in fact, a party to oppression.

During the time that discontent rumbled throughout Ethiopia, the Minister was perceived by many students at the University as one of the few important figures in the regime who was sympathetic with their complaints and who tried with some success tactfully to persuade Haile Selassie to meet their more reasonable demands,

But after two years, the Minister developed too many critics on the right, who poisoned the mind of the Emperor against him and against his pleas for change. He was removed from the scene by being appointed Ambassador to India from 1972 to 1974.

When the coup d'état took place in 1974, most of the high Ethiopian officials who were abroad thanked their stars that they were abroad and stayed there. No doubt many of them would otherwise have been executed.

Ambassador Getachew courageously returned, as ordered, to Addis Ababa. In the early, less bloody, days of the Dergue, someone recalled his understanding of demands for change and the efforts he had been able to make in that direction. In 1975 the revolutionary government consequently appointed him as Ambassador to Egypt, a key post in the Ethiopian Foreign Service. Fortunately, the new Ambassador could be in close touch with unofficial sources in Addis Ababa because of the heavy travel of Ethiopians between that city and Cairo.

As the struggles for power within the Dergue continued, and as its professed goal of peaceful change became less likely of accomplishment as more blood flowed, the Ambassador was ordered home to what would almost certainly have been his death. Since he was hardly enamored of that prospect, he placed himself and his family in exile, and finally made his way to California, where he now lives.

In the fall of 1976, while he was still in Cairo,

Ambassador Getachew began to write a historical and contemporary account of Ethiopia and of the days of Haile Selassie. The present issue of the Notes is an excerpt from this still unfinished work. The author intends to dedicate the book, when completed, to Tegegne Yeteshawork, the Boston-trained editor of the Ethiopian Herald, whose journalistic integrity led to his death. In Ambassador Getachew's words: "Yeteshawork, like so many others, was an innocent victim of the bloody Saturday massacre largely because the jealousy of his own colleagues could not stand his savage frankness and his genuine dedication to the welfare of his country. The forces of evil as represented by the gun and by blind violence, which he abhorred, cut him down in the prime of his youth."

The Africana Library is pleased to be able to present this substantial excerpt from Ambassador Getachew's manuscript because of the light that it sheds on recent developments in Ethiopia that have been largely obscured from local observers and from others concerned with the Ethiopian scene.

E.S.M.

AN INSIDE VIEW OF THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

At the end of 1973, Ethiopia was in turmoil. Students, teachers, and workers of all kinds were demanding their rights and were challenging the very *raison d'être* of the Emperor's regime. To add to the agitation came the sharp price hike of oil by the producing countries of the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973. This was soon followed by a devastating famine, which had actually been ravishing the country for some time but whose impact was felt in full force for the first time in 1974 as the starving peasants began to flock into the cities and towns in large numbers in search of food. Again, it was the student community that raised the alarm about the disaster, long before anyone else either inside or outside Ethiopia. Famines and other natural calamities were nothing new in the country's long history, but the unhappy combination of the political and social awakening of the people, coupled with the acute shortages of food and other commodities, was something new, and proved to be too deadly for the Emperor's regime to survive.

Unfortunately, the Government was totally unprepared to cope with the situation, and when at last it awoke to the implications of the catastrophe that was engulfing the country, it reacted in the only way it knew -- namely, to bring the Emperor himself out to appeal for calm and order by promising all sorts of remedies as usual.

By now, however, three things were clear. The first was that the Emperor was already overexposed, and his appearances on television and radio had become so routine and commonplace as to make little impact on the populace. In the second place, Haile Selassie himself showed great fatigue, and his public appearances only demonstrated what a tired old man he had become. Finally, by now there were obvious signs that the armed services were not happy in their role as instruments of oppression when they were called upon to put down the frequent riots and demonstrations. The brutalities committed by the police and the troops had a tremendous impact in the cities and revolted everybody, not least themselves.

Matters were coming to a head, and the rank and file in the armed services were feeling the pinch of isolation among the general public. Their role was unenviable, and students and other agitators of the progressive elements in the country mercilessly taunted and incited the men in uniform to side with the forces ranged against the regime instead of being used as the big stick in Haile Selassie's hands. Since the majority of the soldiers already sympathized and identified themselves with the plight of the ordinary people, it was now only a matter of time before they too joined in the general uprising. This time came early in 1974.

Mutinies among the troops broke out in Negelle, in Sidamo, in Asmara, and in other places. Soon it was the turn of the Air Force at Bishoftu and of the Navy at Massawa, and indeed of the Addis Ababa garrison itself to join in the widespread agitation.

A POLITICAL VACUUM

This was a situation for which no one in the Government, including Haile Selassie, was prepared. The Prime Minister, Aklilu Habtewold, and the cabinet simply panicked. They had always felt secure as long as they had the support and loyalty of the armed services. Now the unthinkable had happened and there was no one to whom to turn to be saved from the anger of the people who were rioting and demonstrating in the streets. They knew the game was up, and Aklilu and his cabinet resigned on February 29.

The event marked the end of a long chapter and the beginning of another in the advancement of the revolution that was now rapidly gathering momentum. For one thing, it undoubtedly opened the way for a military takeover, even though the military themselves did not fully realize it at the time. During all the turmoil preceding the resignation of the Aklilu Cabinet, if anything was manifestly clear it was the fact that none of the contending forces among the civil population who were calling for the downfall of the old regime was in a position to step

in and fill the vacuum. They all lacked cohesion and organization and were neither ready nor able to shoulder the responsibilities of government.

That left only the armed services, who, with their discipline and tight organization and their newly acquired camaraderie, could at any time come forward and take over. In fact, the whole world expected an announcement to this effect. But they seemed visibly reluctant to do so, at least in the initial stages. Indeed, they moved cautiously and methodically during this period. First they formed a Coordinating Committee, led primarily by the junior officers, that would ensure full cooperation among themselves, and they made every effort to guard against the danger of internal dissension. They then set about systematically removing all possible obstacles in their way and neutralizing potential sources of trouble and opposition. Surprisingly, they seemed actually to overestimate the power and influence of the palace clique, and lived in daily fear of being outmanoeuvred by the wily old Emperor and those around him.

It was at this stage, while the military were still probing and feeling their way, that the Aklilu Cabinet resigned. I was told by an insider of how the news was received by the fledgling Committee at the 4th Division Headquarters in Addis Ababa. The members were assembled in one room, reviewing the security situation and considering the options available to them, when someone whom they had secretly posted at the palace to inform them of developments suddenly burst into the room, panting for breath, and broke the news to them. Their reaction was one of complete surprise. For some unknown reason they all suspected that it was some sort of trick or plot to capture them all as they were assembled in one place and destroy them. Exactly why they felt that way is still a mystery. But the immediate reaction was flight. Pandemonium broke out in the room as they all began to bolt, and a few even jumped out of the windows and broke some bones.

Meanwhile, even at this late hour those around the old Emperor engaged in intrigues and manipulations to try to turn the course of events in their favor. One faction,

led by Asrate Kassa, Chairman of the Crown Council, and by Endalkatchew Makonnen, the newly-sworn Prime Minister, pushed the candidacy of the Crown Prince's son, Zara Yacob, to bypass his own ailing father and be declared heir-apparent and successor to the Emperor. Aklilu and the members of his cabinet, on their part, acted after their resignation as though nothing had happened, and continued their daily attendance at the Palace. This naturally infuriated the people, who saw the whole gesture of the cabinet's resignation as a meaningless, farcical exercise. The new Prime Minister, not surprisingly, wanted to be given a free hand to prove himself.

In what looked to be the existing political vacuum, other elements in the country -- for example, the civil servants, the workers, and even the usually sleepy Parliament -- began to flex their muscles. Demonstrations, strikes, work stoppages, and demands for the dismissal of the department heads and senior executives became the order of the day.

THE MILITARY MAKES ITS MOVE

In this confused state of affairs, the military were particularly careful not to provoke a general conflagration by seeming to move against the Emperor himself prematurely. They felt that the confrontation could wait until such time as they were ready for it. This deference toward the Emperor shown by the young officers of the Coordinating Committee even began to kindle hopes in Haile Selassie's heart that he might be permitted to continue to rule the country with these men serving under him. For it was his strong belief to the very end, repeatedly expressed, that the military could not do without him. With this idea firmly fixed in his mind, he began to collaborate with the young officers to the extent of personally ordering his former confidants, ministers, members of the nobility, and others wanted by the military to forego any thoughts of resistance and immediately to give themselves up to the Coordinating Committee.

He asked them to surrender without "in any way

disturbing the peace of the country and causing unnecessary bloodshed by resisting arrest," and assured them that "no harm would come to them, as their innocence would be proved beyond doubt in a fair trial," if only they would surrender peacefully. It was a strange and pathetic phenomenon and yet a behavior not entirely out of keeping with the nature of Haile Selassie. Either it was a case of an "if you can't defeat them, join them" type of pragmatism or the old man must genuinely have believed the military's reiterated affirmation of loyalty to him. In any event, his own belief that he was still indispensable to the military must have strengthened his resolve to ride out the storm once again and remain on top.

As the military gained more confidence in themselves, they widened their sphere of participation in government. They virtually took over the radio station and the rest of the media and began to broadcast their own communiques from time to time demanding the surrender of wanted persons, together with the arms and ammunition in their possession. More important, they were breathing down the neck of the new Prime Minister and his cabinet, making it impossible for him to make a move without their consent.

From the beginning Endalkatchew's cabinet was a nonstarter from any point of view and could not have been expected to last long, as he himself must have known. It was ironic that he had fulfilled a life-long ambition to take the post that was once held by his own father -- but under what impossible circumstances! In spite of his high qualifications for the job in terms of youth, experience, and education, Endalkatchew was suspect both because of his past connections with the Aklilu cabinet, of which he had been a member, and more particularly because of his strong links with the aristocracy, which made him by definition unacceptable to the new "progressive" elements in the country. No one, it appeared, was in the mood to give him a chance even to try to build the modern democratic, reform government he promised. Less than four months after assuming the premiership, he too was arrested by the military and was forced to join his former colleagues and friends in detention.

With the fall of Endelkatchew, the Coordinating Committee of the armed forces reorganized itself to encompass representation from all sections of the country and all ranks of the services. The reconstituted Committee then indicated unmistakably that it meant to have a direct hand in the day-to-day governance of the nation and in the shaping of its political life. The date was June 27, 1974.

The Committee adopted the motto of "Ethiopia Tikdem," or "Ethiopia Before Self," and proclaimed its readiness to cleanse the country from the age-old corruption and maladministration which its members strongly felt to be the main reasons for Ethiopia's debilitating poverty and backwardness. People from all walks of life -- intellectuals, students, and workers -- hailed them as "saviors of the nation."

The pursuit of persons in high government and social positions continued relentlessly. Every day Addis Ababa radio announced names of those wanted for arrest, and makeshift detention camps, hurriedly prepared in various sections of the city, were soon packed to capacity. Some officials even went so far as to offer themselves voluntarily for detention, in anticipation of their names being called out at any moment by the radio. Amusing (and true) stories circulated about a few former officials who, unwanted for one reason or another by the military, were greatly offended at having been left out. This reflects the strange mentality of people in Addis Ababa at the time; even in a crisis they could not divest themselves of their obsession with status and protocol. When most high officials in the country had been arrested, to be passed over and therefore considered inconsequential was an almost unbearable insult!

Another interesting aspect of all this was that so great was the confidence in ultimate justice and fair play that even those traveling abroad, on hearing that they were wanted, took the first plane home and put themselves at the disposition of the military. Thus all the stalwarts of the old regime, from the highest in the land down to the minions of the palace, were systematically picked up and put behind bars. The old Emperor suddenly found himself all alone.

THE DOWNFALL OF HAILE SELASSIE

For Haile Selassie and all that he stood for, the end was now very near. All that remained was for the military to administer the coup de grace, and it was not long in coming. The mass media, now under the full control of the military, were effectively used to discredit the Emperor by highlighting all his past misdeeds. His shady business dealings, his profiteering activities, the monopolies and exclusive rights enjoyed by him and his family in matters concerning business and property were all given maximum publicity. The enormous treasure, both in cash and in gold bullion worth billions of dollars, stashed away for the most part in numbered accounts in Swiss banks, was demanded to be returned to the "rightful owners -- namely, the Ethiopian people."

All this was shown against the backdrop of the abject poverty of the ordinary citizens of the country and the devastating effect of the terrible famine in Wollo and adjacent provinces that was taking a heavy toll among the rural population. Scenes from Dimbleby's famous film on the Wollo famine were shown on the Addis Ababa television, interspersed with shots from the glittering state banquets at which Haile Selassie was seen presiding with champagne glass in hand, and from other lavish parties, weddings, and social gatherings of the nobility. The sustained propaganda barrage had the desired effect. People in Addis Ababa were only waiting for the final announcement of the Emperor's dethronement.

It came on September 12. In anticipation of the move, people had gathered around the Jubilee Palace, where he resided. After making sure that the palace was heavily guarded by tanks and armored cars against any eventuality, members of the Coordinating Committee detailed for the purpose arrived there, and in the presence of the Emperor's cousin and lifelong companion, Ras Imeru,* read him the

*This nobleman was nicknamed "The Red Ras" in Ethiopia because he was generally regarded as a liberal by reason of his having distributed land to his servants and followers early in his life.

decision of the armed forces to dethrone him. His feeble and mumbling response was to the effect that he had served the country in times of both peace and war, and that if his stepping down now would in any way help the nation's misfortunes, he would do what was required of him.

With that the end came quickly. In spite of his obvious reluctance, he was shoved into a small yellow Volkswagen and was driven under heavy escort to the 4th Division Headquarters to join his former ministers and associates in detention. No one raised a voice or a finger in support of the former Emperor. On the contrary, so effective had been the propaganda campaign against him that the people who lined the streets through which the little Volkswagen passed kept up a sustained chant of "Lebba! Lebba! Lebba! -- in English, "Catch thief! Catch thief! Catch thief!"

Three days later, on September 15, the Coordinating Committee -- or the Dergue, as it had come to be known in Ethiopia -- announced that it had collectively assumed the powers and functions of head of state as the Provisional Military Administrative Council (P.M.A.C.) of Ethiopia. General Aman Michael Andom, an Ethiopian of Eritrean descent, was named as its chairman, and also as Defence Minister and head of the Council of Ministers. This popular general had been brought out of obscurity where, as a member of the moribund Senate, he had been living in semiretirement for the past ten years, mainly because the Dergue felt the need of putting some well-known figure at the head, much as the young officers who toppled King Farouk of Egypt put General Naguib at their head.

As for the dethroned Emperor, apart from occasional outbursts when provoked by questions he considered to be impudent, Haile Selassie was by all accounts a model prisoner. Most of the time, lost in his own thoughts, he sat brooding in his room or walked in the small garden outside it, wrapped in a native shamma, or heavy homespun shawl. Those who saw him in that state remarked that his tiny stature had become even smaller in captivity. With his unkempt hair and beard, he looked like a shriveled gnome -- a sight that aroused the genuine pity and sympathy

of those who had known him in the times of his glory.

Yet his essential nature remained unchanged. He was still a pretentious, and even at times a defiant, man. Two instances will illustrate these qualities. One was when the International Red Cross sent a delegation from Geneva to investigate and report on the condition of the political prisoners in Ethiopia after the military takeover. Haile Selassie received them and talked to them as though he were holding an audience in the old days. He used the royal "we" when he spoke of himself, and tried to give the impression that so far as he was concerned nothing had changed, that he still summoned and met with officials whenever he wanted and gave orders as he had always done. No wonder the members of the delegation went away bewildered, not knowing quite what to make of their meeting with Haile Selassie, prisoner, who lived in a dream world of make-believe.

As for his periodic defiance toward his captors, he adamantly refused to be drawn into a discussion of the billions of dollars he was supposed to have salted away in Switzerland over the years. When one of the officers questioning him mentioned the word "billion," he retorted sarcastically, "Do you mean to tell me that you even know how much a billion is?"

Haile Selassie died a broken man on August 26, 1975, nearly a year after his imprisonment. The circumstances of his death were a matter of speculation by the international press. Even such a prestigious newspaper as The Times of London categorically asserted that he had been murdered. But the fact that he was already 83 years old, and that a few months prior to his death he had undergone a major prostate operation, in which he was given every care and attention, lends strong support to the official version that death came from natural causes. However, in the absence of an autopsy, or of a revelation of one, if any, it is impossible to reach a definite conclusion on this point.

THE FATE OF THE POLITICAL PRISONERS

The 200-odd other prisoners suffered a much worse

fate than that of Haile Selassie. They were subjected to innumerable indignities, including forced shaving of their heads, beatings and floggings, and daily insults. After languishing in high-security detention camps for nearly a year, where they were treated as common criminals, they had to undergo the humiliation of being paraded in public each time they appeared before a Commission of Enquiry set up by the Dergue to investigate their share of responsibility for all the misdeeds committed in the country over the past thirty years. Since everything they said and wrote pointed to the main culprit, Haile Selassie, and since the much-publicized Commission of Enquiry failed to pin down any of those who appeared before it on any specific charge, let alone get a conviction, the whole exercise was a fiasco. Apart from its theatrical value, which gave enormous satisfaction to the petty-minded, nothing of real value was gained from the experience.

One marveled at the ease with which the learned doctors, lawyers, and professors who made up the Commission put the question, "Why did you not resign?" to each of those who appeared before them. They talked glibly of "resignation" as though the word had practicality and meaning in the Ethiopia of Haile Selassie. In their over-zealousness, they made a mockery of justice and succeeded only in revealing themselves as hypocrites. For these were men among the "educated elite" who were known to have done their best to catch the eye of the Emperor earlier in their careers but for one reason or another had failed to occupy high places on the ladder of Ethiopian society.

In the end, when the Commission of Enquiry had completed its work and submitted its report to the Provisional Military Administrative Council, grave but largely unsubstantiated charges were leveled against all the former ministers and high officials. These included charges of corruption, unlawful accumulation of wealth, misuse of political positions for personal gain, and, gravest of all, the charge of criminal negligence in dealing with the famine in Wollo.

In spite of the fact that the accused men were already condemned in the eyes of the public, owing to the

widespread, biased publicity given to the hearing, they nevertheless optimistically looked forward to some sort of trial at which the legal niceties would be scrupulously observed, and at which they would be given a decent chance to defend themselves. It was a vain hope. Their uniform plea that it was Haile Selassie who had concentrated all power in himself and who had never permitted any freedom of action on the part of his ministers went completely unheeded. They were to be the scapegoats for all the misdeeds and excesses of the past.

On the afternoon of Saturday, November 23, 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council sat in judgment on these former associates of Haile Selassie held in custody for political offenses. After taking a vote on the fate of each name on a list of more than 200, fifty-seven were to be executed as "enemies of the people," and the condemned men all faced the firing squad that same night.

Not all of those who were executed could be said to share to the same degree the responsibility for the blunders of the postwar years. Nor could many of them be held accountable for illegal accumulation of wealth, or for misuse of power, or for the natural disaster in Wollo. In any case, in a properly constituted court of law these charges could not by any stretch of the imagination be punishable by death, even Ethiopia. Moreover, because of the harsh sentence and the undue haste with which it was carried out, important lessons that could have been learned by succeeding generations were irretrievably lost.

Until that time, the Ethiopian Revolution was being hailed in the world press as a model worthy of the age-old civilization and culture of the country; its peaceful and orderly march on the path of progress and change promised to bring about a sorely-needed transformation in the socio-political system without unnecessary bloodshed. As a result, people in other countries had followed events in Ethiopia with considerable sympathy, understanding, and goodwill. But with the blood bath of that Saturday night, the good name of Ethiopia was tarnished, perhaps never to be regained.

TENSION IN THE CITY

It is worthwhile now to examine in some detail the circumstances that led up this tragic event.

I had returned from India only the day before, on Friday the 22nd, one of the few ambassadors abroad who heeded the call of the military authorities to return to Addis Ababa. When I arrived in the city, the big news was the terrific row that was raging as a result of the rift that had developed between the Dergue and its flamboyant chairman, General Aman. No one seemed to know exactly why General Aman had suddenly fallen out with the leaders of the ruling body, but all sorts of rumors were floating around and the city was extremely tense. Heavily armed troops in helmets and battle gear and army jeeps with machine guns at the ready were all over the place; armored cars and tanks clattered up and down the steep hilly streets.

The first thing that struck me was that hardly anybody I knew in Addis Ababa was to be seen anywhere in this city in which I had spent a good part of my life; only a couple of years ago I could hardly have walked a few blocks or driven a few hundred meters without encountering people I recognized. I just couldn't believe that Addis Ababa society had changed so much in the three years I had been away in India. So I walked the streets for miles, hoping that I would come across some friend or acquaintance with whom I could talk. But all I saw were strangers, many of them young people with long Afro hair styles, high-heeled shoes, and the latest in unisex dress. One could only tell the boys from the girls by their unkempt goatees or beards. However, the poor, the old, and the infirm of Addis Ababa who always filled the streets were still there, and in even greater numbers. I was walking among them when a healthy-looking young lad in tattered clothes approached me, begging for alms. I got to talking with him for sheer lack of company, and as we walked along I asked him what was happening in the city.

"It is these people from Asmara, sir," he said without hesitation. "They are always at the root of all

the troubles here, and the Army is taking precautions. Just because General Aman has become Chairman of the Dergue, they think that they have all become kings of Ethiopia!" And he launched into a long diatribe about the perfidy of the Eritreans living in Addis Ababa.

"Why do you say such things about Eritreans?" I said to him finally. "You don't even know to whom you are speaking. I may be an Eritrean myself."

"Oh, no," he said, shaking his head violently. "It is impossible. You can't fool me. You just don't look it." And with that he disappeared from my sight.

It was late in the evening when I at last encountered an old friend in front of a well-known Addis Ababa pharmacy. When he saw me, he simply stood frozen and stared at me, unable to say anything. We silently shook hands and kissed on the cheeks in the usual Ethiopian style.

"What has come over you, man? Can't you talk?" I asked him.

"What are you doing here, Getachew?" Then he added in a whisper, "I mean, why did you come back at all?"

"Why not?" I said in mock seriousness, and told him about the government's recall of all ambassadors abroad and about the duty to obey government instructions at all times as disciplined servants of the state, and so on.

"You must really be mad if you believe the things you say," he said. "You talk as if you don't even know what is going on in this country." Then he went on, "I am genuinely surprised to see you back in Addis Ababa, but I am even more astonished to see you walking around in places like this. Nobody here does that nowadays, you know. I myself wouldn't have come here if I had not been obliged to get some medicine for the kids. These are not good times. You never know what may happen anytime, and it is far better not to be seen around. Don't you see all these soldiers all over the place? Now that you are here in Addis Ababa,

please do what everybody else does -- just go home and stay there. Avoid tempting the devil."

I thanked him for his sincere and frank advice, and we parted after exchanging a few more civilities.

The next day, Saturday, the tension in the city was even greater. Apparently the differences between General Aman and the Dergue, instead of being resolved were aggravated, and a confrontation of a serious nature was expected at any moment. Sure enough, by late afternoon, as I was sitting in a hotel with some friends, there were reports that heavy machine-gun fire had been heard in the old airport area where General Aman's house was situated. Some people, largely foreign correspondents, rushed to the area, only to find that it had been cordoned off and all access was blocked.

However, from a distance they could clearly see what was going on. There was no doubt about it; a veritable battle was in progress around the property of General Aman. Troops in jeeps and armored cars had surrounded the house and were firing into it, and the fire was being returned from within. This went on for nearly three hours, beginning about five o'clock in the afternoon.

At news time at eight o'clock we were all glued to our television sets to hear about the day's events, fully expecting some dramatic news. But the announcer told us only that General Aman had been removed from the chairmanship of the Dergue, and read a long statement explaining why such a step had been taken. Among other things, the Dergue accused General Aman of indecisiveness and lack of proper leadership and deplored his refusal to attend meetings of the Dergue on "petty personal grounds." The statement ended with an announcement that a new chairman from outside the Dergue would be appointed within a week. That left everyone even more mystified.

But the day's flurry of military activity was the main topic of conversation that evening. According to most experienced observers, an unusually strong show of force had been visible during the afternoon in certain

sections of the city, especially in the vicinity of Menilek's Grand Palace, where the former officials and members of the nobility were held as prisoners, and around the Jubilee Palace (since renamed the National Palace). Also, it appeared that in addition to cordoning off the approaches to the old airport area, all access to the main Akaki prison was blocked by heavily-armed troops, and residents of that area had to undergo strict security checks before they were allowed to pass. And of course the foreign newsmen who had actually seen General Aman's house being subjected to attack by mortars and machine guns had the gravest misgivings about the fate of the General, assuming that he was still inside.

Gunfire was heard throughout that night in the vicinity of the Akaki Prison and of the General's house, which were not very far apart. And of course Sunday the 24th brought the shocking news.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE EXECUTIONS

In an early morning broadcast, interspersed with martial music, an announcer over Addis Ababa radio read a lengthy statement issued by the Dergue, entitled, "An Important Political Decision." At the end of the statement, the announcer began to read a long list of names -- virtually a Who's Who of the leaders in Ethiopian political and social life for many years -- and it included the name of General Aman. When the last name had been read, the announcer concluded with the following curt, but absolutely appalling, statement: "All the above-mentioned former high officials, members of the nobility, and ex-members of the Dergue were executed by firing squad last night, and since they have already been buried, relatives and friends need not try to recover their bodies." He then added these chilling words: "We have always said that our revolution will attain its proclaimed goals without any bloodshed. We want to make it clear that we still abide by that pledge. We do not consider the events of last night as bloodshed because, in our view, the blood of these people which was spilled last night was not innocent blood."

Addis Ababa dwellers were stunned. They simply could not believe their ears, and the utter cynicism and heartlessness, especially as revealed in the last part of the announcement, offended everyone's sense of decency. The shame and outrage felt by people of all kinds were expressed openly in the streets.

The city was immediately plunged into gloom and darkness, as persons in black mourning dress started streaming from house to house to console the relatives of the dead, and to join them in mourning in accordance with the time-honored Ethiopian custom. Makeshift tents were pitched everywhere to accommodate the mourners, and the weeping and wailing could be heard all over the city for weeks after the tragic event. The authorities attempted to intimidate people and to prevent them from going to the houses of the deceased by posting troops in jeeps at the approaches of each house, but in general the mourners took no notice of them.

It must have come as a surprise to the military that the mourners cut across all class barriers; rich and poor alike were literally washed in tears. The class antagonism that the Marxist-oriented section of the military had been fomenting through the media for nearly a year had apparently not sunk in. As a matter of fact, Addis Ababa society has always been close-knit, and though the elements of the exploiter and the exploited existed, the interdependence of the people in their day-to-day life was such as to eliminate all traces of real hatred at a time like this.

Against the advice of my friends, who were sincerely concerned for my safety, I visited each one of the tents and grieved with the wives, children, and other relatives of my former friends and colleagues. It was in one of these places of mourning, a full week after the massacre, that I met an old friend of mine, an officer in the army who was, surprisingly, still in the service. After the usual exchange of greetings, he told me that he had managed somehow to retain the confidence of his junior officers and men, which automatically put him in the good books of the Dergue. That explained his status. But he looked very sad and dejected.

"Come on, man, what's the trouble?" I asked him. "You are all right as a soldier, I suppose. After all, you are among the rulers. Why should you be so upset?"

"It is this shifty people of ours in Ethiopia! They make me sick! They pressed the army to kill and kill. The army took them seriously, and after a lot of hesitation executed some of those marked out for elimination. But not all of them, mind you." He continued, "And look now at the result. They are all blaming us for doing exactly what they wanted us to do."

"It was a big mistake," I told him. "You shouldn't have taken what people said at face value. Times were bad and people were angry, you know. You should have realized that they may not have meant what they said."

"I told my colleagues as much," he replied, "but who listens nowadays? Every one of these young men in the army thinks that he has the solution for all the ills that beset this country!"

It was a help to find someone who knew the working of the collective mind of the Dergue discussing current events so frankly in that tense and stifling atmosphere in which everyone spoke, if at all, in hushed tones. I took the opportunity to ask about a friend of mine who had been among those executed. Tegegne Yeteshawork was a young (still in his thirties), brilliant Boston-trained journalist who had been editor-in-chief of the Ethiopian Herald for more than twelve years. In spite of the open animosity Haile Selassie showed toward him, most unfairly, because of a long-standing political feud that existed between himself and the young man's late father, Tegegne had risen by dint of hard work and his own merit to a position as head of the Press Department in the Ministry of Information at the time I was in charge of that Ministry, and I thought a great deal of him.

"What about Tegegne Yetshawork?" I asked. "What did he do to deserve this? Why was he marked out for elimination?"

"To tell you the truth," replied my informant, the army did not even know who Tegegne Yeteshawork was. The people who made him a marked man were his own colleagues, who accused him of all sorts of things. They were the ones who got him killed. Besides, Tegegne's behavior in captivity was not helpful. He was always defiant and mockingly abusive of the army. He was one of the few whose spirit the army did not manage to break. He never showed any respect for the gun, and he irritated a lot of soldiers, especially those on guard duty. I am sure that too must have strengthened the army's resolve in the end to finish him."

GENERAL AMAN VS. THE DERGUE

Little by little a clearer picture began to emerge as more and more information came filtering in to me from all sides, and I propose now to fill in some of the gaps.

So far as General Aman was concerned it seems that what had actually happened was that the general had been offended by the description of him in the international press as being a figurehead only, while real power resided elsewhere. He wanted very much to be accepted as the true leader of the military government. Not only was he the most senior and by far the most experienced officer among the members of the Dergue, but also he was an educated, accomplished, and cultivated man. He was held in high repute within the country and was respected as a noted linguist and internationalist abroad.

The original membership of the Dergue, on the other hand, consisted largely of junior officers and representatives from the ranks of the forty-odd units stationed in different parts of the country. Many of them were undisciplined soldiers and known troublemakers, sent off to Addis Ababa simply to get rid of them. This phenomenon, unfortunately, was not without precedent in Ethiopia; it had already become common practice in the periodic elections to the National Parliament to send as

elected members unwanted troublemakers from the various regions.

Obviously the elements for a confrontation between General Aman and the Dergue were there. And true to the blood that ran in his veins, General Aman reacted to both real and imagined slights from his juniors in a forthright manner. Among other things, he is reported to have suggested that membership in the Dergue be rotated among all officers and other ranks, and not be regarded as a permanent monopoly of those who held the positions in the beginning. In so doing, of course, he roused the displeasure of the entire group by raising the specter of their dislodgment from power just at the time they were starting to relish it. He must have known that in proposing such an idea he was courting real danger, but he seems to have been confident that he could carry the day and maintain his leadership. He was mistaken.

From that time on he attracted the intense suspicion of the members of the Dergue, who now began to see him as one who was only using them as a stepping stone to ultimate power. Their view was reinforced by the fact that the General began openly to express his disenchantment with the Dergue. He was reported to have said to close associates that "The boys in the Dergue are now slowly coming out in their true colors . . . , and those colors appear to me to be mostly pink or various shades of red."

Not surprisingly, the Dergue moved into action. They posted a security detail to watch the General's every movement, and his telephone and other conversations were taped and documented. In a short while the Dergue picked up much that was incriminating from these tapes as the beleaguered General made desperate attempts to rally those whom he considered to be his allies in the army to come to his support.

While all this was going on, the vital questions of how to deal with the intractable Eritrean problem and what to do with the 200-odd political prisoners held in

custody at the old Menelik Grand Palace were high on the agenda of the Dergue. Now, much has been written to indicate that General Aman's differences with the Dergue stemmed largely from these two issues. Although there may be some truth in this as concerns the methods of approach advocated by the two sides, the fact remains that both the Dergue and General Aman were agreed on the essentials -- namely, first, that no course of action should be pursued that would in any way encourage the secessionists in Eritrea, and second, that an example should be made of the persons held in prison by executing some of them.

Indeed, with respect to the troublesome northern province, there is every indication that the entire membership of the Dergue, including its chairman, were fully committed to a policy of bringing about a peaceful solution of the problem. To that end a formula that would satisfy virtually all the known demands of the Eritreans, short of granting the right of secession, was being devised with the full knowledge and approval of General Aman. There was an equally strong determination on both sides to see to it that in the interim law and order were to be properly respected in the area and that the activities of the rebels were to be brought under some sort of control.

In the event, what seems to be incontestable from the available evidence is that when General Aman paid a visit to the province the Eritrean secessionists in fact took full advantage of the cease fire observed by the 2nd Division in Asmara for the duration of his stay, an act that was meant to permit a breathing space for peace negotiations to start in earnest. Worse still, the subsequent withdrawal of military units from all strategic positions in Asmara and its surroundings, on the express recommendation of General Aman after his return to Addis Ababa, only furthered the objectives of the secessionists by making it easier for them to infiltrate the inner defenses of the provincial capital.

There is every reason to think that the General made this suggestion in good faith, in the full belief

that he was facilitating the path to peace. Unhappily, the fact that the secessionists betrayed his trust laid the General open to the charge of collusion with the enemy by his colleagues in the Dergue. Moreover, his refusal to lend his support to the request of the 2nd Division for reinforcements to cope with the rapid increase in guerilla infiltration only heightened the suspicions concerning his motives.

When, at a meeting chaired by the General himself, the Dergue voiced their criticism of his handling of the situation, the General was extremely offended by what he considered to be a blatant lack of confidence on the part of those whom he still viewed as his subordinates. From then on he refused to attend any meetings of the Dergue.

SELECTION OF THE VICTIMS

So far as the other controversial matter was concerned -- that is, the question of the number of people to be executed -- the Dergue seems to have made its decision on the issue some months before that fateful Saturday in November. This particular matter had been entrusted to a small group of the members, and it is probable that neither General Aman nor most of the Dergue members knew any of the details about the selection. When at last the list was completed and was shown to the chairman and to other prominent members of the Dergue, it is true that the General winced at the unexpectedly large numbers of persons named for execution. Many of them are known to have been his long-time personal friends and acquaintances.

General Aman, as chairman of the Dergue, was clearly in a most difficult position. However, there was one mitigating circumstance; a compromise decision was reached that the question of who was to die and who was to be spared was to be submitted to a vote of the entire membership of the Dergue. A nearly two-thirds majority (70 votes) was to be needed to send a man to his death. The proponents of this decision hoped thereby to reduce substantially the number of those

who were to be executed. Preparations for implementing it were already underway when the crisis of confrontation broke over the General's head.

What finally forced the hand of the Dergue seems to have been the pressure brought to bear from elements of the battalion stationed at the Menelik Grand Palace on guard over the prisoners. Soldiers from this battalion complained bitterly that they had been subjected to insults and abuses by the relatives and friends of the prisoners who came to the palace to bring food and other essentials. The soldiers are reported to have made it quite clear that they would no longer be subjected to these daily provocations, and to have blamed the Dergue for not taking a quick decision on the fate of the prisoners. It has even been said that the Dergue received "serious threats" from some of the guards that they would kill all the prisoners under their charge unless the Dergue took immediate steps to resolve the situation. How serious these threats were, in actual fact, is difficult to assess, but there is little question that they heightened the sense of urgency about the whole affair.

In any case, by the second week of November all forty units of the army across the country were requested to send their best marksmen to Addis Ababa for what was termed "a top secret special duty." These men were, of course, to form the firing squads at the forthcoming executions, and the Dergue wanted to make sure that everybody in the armed services had a hand in the actual deed through their chosen representatives.

When the crisis over General Aman and the chairmanship of the Dergue broke out the following week, the marksmen from the various units were already assembling at the 4th Division Headquarters in Addis Ababa. This fact alone gives the lie to the reports that circulated in Ethiopia and abroad that the Dergue had had no plans to execute the prisoners prior to the crisis precipitated by Aman's refusal to attend further meetings of the Dergue. In retrospect it seems clear that the plan to execute as many of the prisoners as possible, perhaps all of them, without trial, existed almost from the time the leadership

of the uprising was taken over by the military in mid-April. It would be quite unfair to accuse all of those involved with the Dergue of complicity in the plot to wipe out the prisoners, but the evidence indicates that the noncommissioned officers and the privates who constituted an overwhelming majority of the 120 members of the Dergue clamored from the beginning for the total annihilation of those whom they regarded, rightly or wrongly, as having been the root cause for the miserable conditions of their existence.

When matters came to a head with General Aman, the confusion and drama that surrounded the episode provided the kind of opportunity that this element of the Dergue had been waiting for. They instituted a sort of mob rule, and the officers of higher rank could do little about it. (Like the United Nations, the Dergue had adopted the rule of equality of vote regardless of rank or status, but unlike the U.N., no one among its members had the power of veto.)

Nevertheless, they tried. At the insistence of a group of officers -- one colonel and seven or eight majors and captains -- a special meeting of the Dergue was held on Saturday evening, November 23rd, not at the Menelik Grand Palace, their usual meeting place, but at the Jubilee Palace. The sergeants and corporals vehemently disputed the necessity of holding a meeting, but the officers, to their credit, argued strongly that in the absence of a proper trial it was absolutely essential at least to take a vote on those who were to die. Fortunately, the officers won out on this point, and some 140 of the 200-odd political prisoners whose names were forwarded for summary execution owe their lives to those who insisted on taking a vote that day.

When at last the time for voting came, the behavior of most of the members of the Dergue was nothing short of scandalous. As the name of a well known personality was read aloud, their hands shot up automatically in a vote for his death. When the name of a lesser known person was called out, they were seen to nudge the fellow members sitting next to them, asking hurriedly, "Who is he? Where

did he work?" Many of the prisoners were saved from the firing squad by the sheer luck of not being known to this ruthless group of people who were simply out to spill blood for its own sake.

But of the rest, fifty-seven were not so fortunate. These were men whose names had been mentioned almost every day in the newspapers and on radio and television, well known figures who had played prominent roles in Ethiopia's political and social life for many years. They paid with their lives the price of being famous,

No wonder all thinking Ethiopians bowed their heads in shame when they felt the full impact of the military's mortifying deeds that day. It was an unforgivable betrayal of our long-cherished civilization and love of justice. But how much more terrible it was for the victims! Their reactions, as related to me by eyewitnesses, were heartrending.

THE NIGHT OF THE MASSACRE

For the prisoners at the Grand Palace, Saturday the 23rd was just another boring day like any other day. By then they had grown so accustomed to the tension which permeated the grounds, the coming and going of the military personnel, that they scarcely noticed these things any longer. Past differences and rivalries among them had become reconciled in the sharing of their discomfort and misfortunes. From the harsh treatment they had received up to that time, they were conditioned to expect the worst at any moment. But hope dies hard, and they believed that some miracle would occur to save them still. After all, had they not been promised an impartial trial? They pinned their hopes on that, on the belief that the Ethiopian soldier would always abide by his word of honor, and on the pressure of public opinion both inside and outside the country. So they occupied themselves in preparing their defense, and in the process harassed their wives and friends to gather bits of information and evidence to be used at the trial.

About eight o'clock that evening two prison vans arrived at the gates of the palace cellars, in which the prisoners had been kept for months in two makeshift dormitories with little ventilation and practically no sunlight. The two prefects, chosen by the prisoners from among themselves to represent them in all matters concerning their common welfare, were summoned to the gates and were given lists of names of inmates who were to report immediately "for further interrogation." The two hapless prefects went back to their respective dormitories with the lists in their hands and read the names aloud.

When the sudden call came, some of the men were eating a meal, others were playing cards on the floor, and nearly all of them were in their pajamas, ready for bed. When they asked to be given time to change, the officer in charge told them curtly that it was not necessary, since they "would be back in no time." The prisoners had become used to being summoned at short notice, and occasionally at untimely hours, but this time there was something foreboding about it all that did not escape their notice.

What really startled them, and gave them an inkling of what was to come, was the sight that met their eyes as they stepped outside and saw the men who were waiting for them around the prison vans. These were not the soldiers they were used to. These men were rougher in both appearance and behavior. As the prisoners came out of the cellars the soldiers quickly pounced on them and manacled them one to another in pairs, using unnecessary violence. Those of the more fortunate fellow inmates who had a glimpse of all this before the iron gates were slammed in their faces had no doubt that something terrible was going to happen to their friends.

The two vans headed toward Addis Ababa's main prison, escorted by heavily-armed soldiers in jeeps and armored cars. Akaki Prison -- nicknamed "Alem Bekagne" in Amharic, meaning "I give up this world" -- was bright with floodlights when the vans arrived. The escorting soldiers jumped out and shouted for the prisoners to come

down, which they did, slowly and hesitantly, all of them showing fear and bewilderment. Then they were herded into a rather small room, hardly large enough to accommodate them all. It was there, with helmeted soldiers, submachine guns at the ready, standing around them, that they were told for the first time that they were to die. A member of the Dergue, an officer, stood in their midst on a hurriedly-brought chair and announced that the Dergue had decided to execute all of them as "enemies of the people" and that the decision would be carried out immediately.

There was a stunned silence. Then Ras Mesfin, the oldest among them, spoke.

"Look here, young man," he said, "so far as I am concerned I have lived a full life and I have no regrets. For me this is a moment I have been waiting for, and I welcome death with open arms. The worst thing that could happen to a man of honor who has served his country all his life is to face humiliation in old age. I am now seventy-five years old, and all I have sought since the beginning of these disturbances in our country was just a bullet in the head to put me to rest once and for all. I am actually grateful to you for promising me that at long last. But let me give you the advice of a dying old man. At least spare the lives of the young people here. They will be useful to you and to the country someday. Don't waste the lives of educated and experienced young men like Endalkatchew and Alexander. You will live to regret it afterwards. Mark my words."

With this, the tension was broken, and everyone began at once to talk and to gesticulate. The officer from the Dergue shouted them down and threatened to give the order to shoot them then and there unless they kept quiet. The soldiers knelt and cocked their submachine guns menacingly, ready to fire. That had a sobering effect and all was quiet in a matter of seconds.

Then began the slaughter. Armed soldiers came into the room in batches of three or more to prod groups of the prisoners out of the room and into the floodlit

courtyard, where they were shot against the wall by the waiting firing squad. With sixty people to kill (General Aman and two others brought the number to this total), the task took several hours; one bunch was dispatched, the bodies removed, and another batch brought out. The gunfire at Akaki Prison that night lasted until well past midnight.

A distracting factor that must have added to their discomfiture of the executioners was the behavior during the executions of the convicts confined in the Akiki Prison. The terrible commotion caused by the noise of intermittent gunfire, followed by the piercing screams of the victims, was unbearable, even for hardened criminals. Moreover, somehow the entire prison community came to believe that the army had decided to kill all of them and clear the prison to make room for other political prisoners. The inmates began to shout and make a frightful din, and then the noise settled down to a sustained chant of "Egzio Mahrene Christos" (Lord have mercy upon us). Their behavior heightened the tension, and when shouting at them to be quiet had no effect, the extremely nervous soldiers began to shoot indiscriminately in the direction of the prison buildings. No one will ever know how many inmates were killed or injured as a result of that mindless act.

It was said, understandably, that the executioners were enormously relieved when the whole bloody business was over at last and they were whisked away to their barracks, leaving to convict laborers at the prison the task of dumping the bodies into mass graves prepared in advance. There were others who were as much or more relieved, no doubt. These were the members of the Dergue, who stayed in session continuously until the job was completed. They sat in the main audience hall of the former Jubilee Palace until the officer assigned to that duty came to tell them that the deed was well and truly done in accordance with their wishes. Then, after dutifully affixing their signatures to the relevant documents, signifying their unanimous agreement with respect to the executions, they rose and congratulated one another by shaking hands.

LAST WORDS

Apart from Ras Mesfin, who had had his say before he died, a few of the others also made their views known while they were waiting to be dragged out into the courtyard. According to reliable and independent sources close to the principal actors in the drama, here is some of what they said.

Aklilu Habtewold, Ex-Prime Minister:

"Do you soldiers really mean to say that all that we have done in the service of our country over a long period was wrong? I simply cannot believe that you of all people would deny us credit for at least some of the things we have done for the common good. You can do what you like with me, but I fear for the country."

Endalkatchew Makonnen, Ex-Prime Minister:

"The only fault you found with me is that I am an educated man. I was trying my very best to serve my country. But you don't understand. Why all this needless killing? Surely that is not the way to serve one's beloved country."

Abebe Retta, Cabinet Minister:

"You soldiers are terribly mistaken. Ethiopia is a complicated country, and your solutions to her problems are too simple. You cannot rule this country this way. You will learn the hard way."

Assefa Ayene, Lieutenant General and Ex-chief of Staff:

"Do you really know whom you are killing, or is it a case of mistaken identity? My record as a soldier and public servant is clean. You must know that you are spilling the blood of an innocent man. This is sheer madness."

Alexander Desta, Ex-Deputy Commander of the Navy,
grandson of the Emperor:

"I knew what was coming, and I was well on my way to get out of this country and escape. I blame His Imperial Majesty for my death because he is the one who forced me to return and stay against my will,"

However, most of the other victims, according to all first-hand reports, went to their deaths silently, with dazed, confused, or resigned looks on their faces. For those who had to wait in that room for their turn to come, listening to the firing and the commotion outside, the experience must have been totally numbing -- akin to a second death. No wonder that many of the victims were reported to have been either semiconscious or even unconscious when they faced the firing squad. General Assefa Ayene was actually taken from a hospital on a stretcher for the purpose, and at least two others were shot as they sat in wheelchairs.

AFTERMATH

As for the widows and children of the victims, who had already been subjected for nearly a year to severe mental and emotional strain, knowledge of the agonizing end of their loved ones was deeply painful, and left a scar for the rest of their lives. To make matters worse, the military authorities, in what can only be regarded as a sadistic act, waited a full five months after the executions to hand over the personal effects of the victims to their bereaved families. All the widows were summoned to the secretariat of the Dergue and were given their husbands' clothing, watches, spectacles, shoes and slippers, used razor blades, soiled socks. This "generous gesture" came just as they were beginning to get over the terrible shock of their loss, and plunged them once again into deep sorrow. Not long thereafter most of these unhappy widows and their grown children, as though they had not suffered enough, were arrested and taken off to jail, accused of "counter-revolutionary activities." Many of them are still there today.

THE NATURE OF THE DERGUE

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the Dergue from the beginning was its anonymity. Its members moved from place to place like shadowy Kafkaesque characters, unknown to all around them. This very circumstance automatically conferred on them the ability to wreak havoc on any individual, or group of individuals, without fear of retribution.

In a society in which tradition is deeply rooted, and in which authority has customarily been associated with clearly defined and accepted persons and institutions, the concept of exercising power through anonymity is not only suspect by definition but also sinister. The Dergue's penchant for anonymity is still very much in evidence, and as long as it exists confidence in government, which is the basis of stability in any society, is bound to erode.

However, in the past year or two the masks have begun to slip, little by little. For one thing, the Dergue has undergone several transformations in its structure. For another, intense internal rivalries, involvement in frequent armed clashes with the several opposition groups that have sprung up, and sheer attrition have taken a heavy toll of the original membership. The leaders at the top have been fairly well known for some time now, and even the 40 or 50 members who remain of the original 120 can no longer hide successfully behind the cloak of secrecy that has always protected them. In fact, some people who made it their business to track down and identify the members of the Dergue from the beginning are known to have in their possession files that contain detailed information on each one, complete with photographs, copies of identification papers, and service numbers.

The man who succeeded General Aman as chairman of the Dergue, Brigadier General Tafari Bante, was his exact opposite in personality and background. Born of Galla stock, General Tafari was essentially a self-effacing man of modest disposition who kept a low profile and at all times seemed content in his role as a puppet of the Dergue.

Yet even that could not save him from elimination. General Tafari was killed on February 17, 1977, together with six other members of the Dergue, on trumped-up charges of plotting with counter-revolutionaries. It is now an open secret that all seven were removed because they had drawn impressive votes in an election to select officers who would occupy key positions in the most recent reorganization. The machiavellian hand behind this manoeuvre was Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, an ambitious man.

In the continuing struggle for power, Colonel Mengistu seems to be the front runner at present. A tough officer known for his ruthlessness, Mengistu is of humble birth and has had little formal education. He is said to be obsessed with a desire for "vengeance" against all those whom he considers to have been better endowed in life than himself. Ironically, everything that he has done within the Dergue so far echoes Haile Selassie as to manner and methods. Mengistu's firm belief in controlling the power of the purse, his liking for pulling strings from behind the scenes, his devotion to minute detail, these and other qualities are strongly reminiscent of the former Emperor.

Meanwhile, the nature of the Dergue itself is changing, not always for the better. The most recent reorganization divides the whole into three areas of responsibility: the executive (17 members), the polit bureau (40 members), and the congress (63 members). The attempt to run a "civilian" cabinet along with the military apparatus is proving cumbersome. Not only has it led to unnecessary waste and duplication, but it has robbed the Dergue of the one attribute with which military governments are usually credited -- that is, efficiency and decisiveness in day-to-day administration.

Another handicap that the Dergue has come up against is a signal failure to make any impression on their audiences when they have finally ventured to address public meetings. These young and inexperienced soldiers with their incomprehensible Marxist-Maoist jargon, their occasional foul language, went down badly with the people. Appearances

on the mass media have had little more success; in fact, the listeners have become increasingly bored by the tasteless propaganda broadcasts emanating from Addis Ababa radio and television day after day.

FULL CIRCLE

Today Ethiopia is back to square one, in that the elements which were struggling for human rights during the last years of Haile Selassie's rule -- the students, the intellectuals, the workers -- are again becoming vocal in their demands for the same rights.

The military regime, in which so much hope and confidence were placed at the time of the revolution, has paid little more than lip service to their promised political and social reforms; they have been preoccupied instead with jockeying for power and with the tools of oppression. A wry joke heard more than once on the streets of Addis Ababa was this: "We used to have only one Haile Sellasie; now we have 120 Haile Selassies."

Under the tightly centralized control in the hands of a ruthless clique, force, rather than consultation, negotiation, or persuasion, has rendered the old problems of the country even more intractable, while new problems keep cropping up every month. For example, the brutal prosecution of the much-needed land reform program led immediately to the disruption of harvests, and food shortages became even more widespread. The hasty nationalization of businesses, industries, and farms without careful preparation and experienced personnel has brought production almost to a standstill. Violence and crime are rampant in the streets. Educated and professional people -- lawyers, doctors, engineers -- are getting out, many of them returning to the western countries where they received their training. The long-term damage that such a brain-drain can cause to the country's future growth and development is incalculable. Nor are they the only ones who are leaving. There has been a steady outflow of refugees making their way across the borders.

It is a sad commentary on the policies and performance of a regime that began its work by announcing total amnesty to all offenders, by throwing open the doors for release of political prisoners, and by inviting those living abroad in exile to return home without let or hindrance, to end up in three short years by turning the country into a concentration camp from which people want only to escape. And escape is not easy. Denial of passports and other travel documents is standard practice, in contravention of a widely recognized human right to leave one's country and return to it freely.

Indeed, the catalogue of serious human-rights violations -- arbitrary arrest and detention without trial, the use of torture, mass killings, and many others -- seem thus far to have eluded the notice of the international bodies concerned with such matters.

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